like your blood knows the way

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like your blood knows the way

by damnslippyplanet

Summary

Will can’t help a snort of laughter. “Tenacity and a fondness for plaid. It’s a miracle anyone can tell us apart. It must be the dog hair that tips people off.” Or the aftershave, but he’s not going to bring that up again if Hannibal isn’t.

Hannibal tilts his head fractionally, like a dog listening to a pitch humans can’t hear. He takes a slow sip from his glass before he responds.

“It might be the heartbeat.”

Oh. That.

(Or: The S1 AU where Hannibal's a vampire, Will's asexual, and there are some things to work out.)

Notes

While this one didn't want to be complete in time for either of the Halloween fests, I couldn't resist posting the first part under the wire. The rest should follow soon, it's mostly written. Stay tuned, my darlings.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

“I didn’t know you could bleed.”

Will wants to retract the inane statement instantly. Hannibal just looks at him with something that probably started out to be a quirk of his mouth, but ends up in more of a grimace when it pulls at his split lip.

“You never asked.”

He wants to ask now, but it’s probably the twelve or thirteenth item on a list of questions that starts out with *did you know what Budge was when you told me about him?* and ends with *what the hell happened here?* None of them seem like gateways to a conversation that should be had in the middle of Hannibal’s office, bloody and bruised, surrounded by investigators and analysts and a very irritated Jack Crawford.

(*Is* that a bruise on Hannibal’s cheek? *Does* he bruise? Is it a smudge? Will’s fingers twitch, restless; he clenches them into a fist and ignores the shock of pain.)

Hannibal glances out wearily over the wreckage of his office - apparently two vampires fighting can do a lot of damage - and continues, “I can bleed. I heal quickly, but it isn’t instantaneous. Don’t worry. It would have to be much worse than this to require medical assistance.”

Ah. That explains the confused EMTs lurking by the door, then: no one had warned them the crime scene they were being called to was two-thirds non-human. And by the looks of the third, he’s long past any help they could give.

“He was the patient you mentioned?”

“Yes. I’d been considering a referral.”

Too late now hangs in the air between them for a long moment until Jack returns with more questions. Will does his best to fade unobtrusively into the background. It’s a trick he’s long since perfected, except that it never seems to work on Hannibal. It doesn’t work now, any more than it has any of the other times he’s tried it. Hannibal answers Jack’s questions, but his eyes rarely leave Will.

It’s probably for the best that Hannibal offered his hospitality instead of a long drive home: between the two of them, they’re only barely an entire functioning person.

While Hannibal limps slowly up the stairs to freshen up the guest room, Will manages to light the fireplace awkwardly with his fully functional hand. And to keep the cursing to a bare minimum when he bangs the other bandaged hand against the hearth.

By the time Hannibal returns (his tread audible instead of cat-silent, he really must still be hurt) Will's managed to pour two glasses of bourbon. Minimal spilling, surreptitiously wiped up with a shirt-tail. It just had to be his *right* hand he'd used to ward Budge off, of course.

"I'll drink it if you don't want it," he offers along with the glass. "But I've seen you drink, so…"

"It doesn't affect or nourish me, but I can enjoy the flavor and the social ritual. Thank you, Will."

Grave; formal. He's a bit tidier now, shirt-sleeves rolled up, most of the blood washed way. The smudge is still there on Hannibal's cheek, but it seems paler. Will's urge to touch it hasn't gone away.

Instead, he finds his way to one of the armchairs and falls into it with a groan like he might never move again. He raises the glass to the firelight for a moment before swallowing most of it down. He mostly succeeds in not smirking when Hannibal takes the opposite chair, a mirroring of their places in his office.

"I'd ask if you arranged the room this way on purpose, but I'm pretty sure you don't do anything by accident."

"Your injuries were an accident. I didn't know Mr. Budge would attack you." A sip of amber liquid; a steady unblinking gaze. Does Hannibal blink? Will hasn't looked him in the eyes enough to know. "I was worried you were dead."

"I'm harder to kill than I look."

"Yes. We have that in common."

Will can't help a snort of laughter at that. "Tenacity and a fondness for plaid. It's a miracle anyone can tell us apart. It must be the dog hair that tips people off." *Or the aftershave*, but he's not going to bring that up again if Hannibal isn't.

Hannibal tilts his head fractionally, like a dog listening to a pitch humans can't hear. He takes a slow sip from his glass before he responds.

"It might be the heartbeat."

Oh. That.

Companionable silence shades into sleep so smoothly that Will doesn't even know it's happened until he startles awake at the weight of a blanket settling over him. Blinking feels slow, his eyelids dragging open heavily.

Hannibal's hands pause in mid-motion where they were spreading the blanket over him, a few inches away. Will vaguely supposes that he ought to have been more startled by waking to someone that close.

“I’m sorry - I didn’t intend to wake you.” Hannibal sounds annoyingly alert.

“It’s fine. Shouldn’t sleep down here all night anyway. I’d regret it in the morning.”

Hannibal’s laughing at him somewhere behind his calm expression, Will’s almost sure. It must seem laughable to someone who’s going to live forever: Will’s aging bones. His back that makes him regret it anytime he falls asleep sitting upright. His heart with its finite number of beats left; his hand that aches and throbs with each beat.

It *must* be funny, but Hannibal maintains his calm courtesy.

“Go on up to bed, then. The second door on the left is yours. You should be able to find anything you need for the night.

“Guest coffin and everything?”

Apparently Hannibal does blink after all, at least when he’s taken aback.

“You’re full of questions tonight,” he responds, sidestepping the question. “Has your brush with a second vampire made you curious about us?”

“Budge was like that girl in Minnesota. The one the Shrike didn’t kill. A negative.” Even sleepy as he is, Will knows he’s not making any sense. He tries harder to organize a coherent thought. “He wasn’t like you. I can see that now; how you’re different.”

Hannibal’s not a *warm* man by any human standard, but his face in the firelight glows. Will doesn’t know how he’s failed to notice this expression before. Maybe it’s new, or maybe it’s just one of the things he understands better now that he’s seen what a vampire *not* caring about him looks like.

“Then perhaps today’s sacrifices weren’t entirely wasted. But I’m keeping you from your rest. In a *bed* , not a coffin.”

Hannibal’s tone doesn’t leave any room for further questions tonight. Will goes as he’s told, taking the blanket upstairs with him, bundled around his shoulders like a cape. Even before he’s left the room Hannibal’s stoking the fire higher, like someone who’s been cold for a very long time.

Chapter 2

Waking in a strange bed is becoming familiar, given the way Jack keeps sending Will after far-flung horrors as if there aren't enough home-grown ones close to hand. It's still not a pleasant way to wake up. Other sheets never feel right, and he misses the dogs.

All things considered, though, Hannibal's guest room turns out to be a pretty good place to wake up if one must be in a strange place. The sheets still aren't quite right but they do feel soft and smell good, and the thermos of coffee on the bedside table smells even better. A short, elegantly handwritten note rests beside it, weighed down by a house key: apologies for retiring before daylight, breakfast downstairs, a request for Will to please lock up when he leaves.

If he were a bit more awake he'd feel embarrassed at having been observed in his sleep. But for the moment he can shove that aside in favor of coffee in bed. Which would probably horrify Hannibal, but he shouldn't have brought Will coffee if he didn't expect him to drink it. So Will lets himself come awake slowly, taking stock of his injuries and of the day ahead, before rolling out of bed and into the shower.

When he emerges into the hallway, damp but clean and mostly awake, the house is still and quiet as if he were alone in it. No other breath, no other heartbeats. But then that doesn't mean much.

What does mean something, he knows in his bones before his mind has a chance to catch up, is that Hannibal's bedroom door is open, a faint light spilling out.

(Some day, Will imagines, he may have a discussion with Hannibal about the difference between an invitation and a lure.)

For the moment he just goes with it, as he knows Hannibal intended, one steady step after another down the hall and into the room. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust. Other than the one dim bedside lamp, the room is sealed tight against daylight, heavy blackout curtains drawn over the windows. Drapery that looks thick and light-blocking hangs near the bed but isn't pulled shut. *Obvious, Doctor*, he thinks. But doesn't stop moving forward, so apparently obvious works.

Hannibal's asleep or whatever his equivalent is: unmoving, unbreathing, with none of the tiny expressions or alert tension that animates him at night. It should be disconcerting, but Will's threshold for *disconcerting* has gotten a bit off-kilter the last few months and all he feels is an odd, tender ache in his chest.

Which is ridiculous, he knows. Any sense of seeing something he wasn't meant to see, something open and vulnerable, is a lie, because Hannibal *meant* for him to see this.

Even so.

Hannibal's injuries have almost entirely healed overnight. There's only the faintest shadow of a smudge where the bruise on his cheek was, and the cut on his forehead is so thoroughly healed that you'd have to know it was there to find it again: a thin white line like a scar healed years ago.

The urge to touch is back, mingling oddly with that tenderness to create something darker and more tangled. He wonders if Hannibal would hear, should Will speak. Whether he'd startle and stir, if touched. *Psyche*, Will thinks. *Looking for the monster in the man*. There's nothing to go searching for here: Hannibal's a man and a monster both, and has been since long before he came into Will's life.

He's spoken before he's planned what to say: "Good morning, Hannibal."

There's no answering blink or twitch, and Will doesn't stop himself then. He reaches out across the inches and brushes a thumb across the dark spot, lightly and then harder, pressing down where it would still be tender and sore if Hannibal were human. The skin under his fingertips is cool, and Hannibal doesn't flinch.

He could move his touch to trace the thin, healed scar a few inches above the bruise. An image bubbles up to the surface of his mind unbidden: He could traverse the line with his fingernail; he could dig in. He could re-open the wound; would Hannibal bleed then, when his skin opened for Will? Or would he open bloodlessly, like an anatomical specimen?

Will's the one who flinches at that thought; surely there's been enough pain inflicted in the last day. Enough blood. He draws his hand away and considers, instead, that he could stay. Spend the day at Hannibal's house instead of his own; read his books, walk his hallways. Order in a pizza and horrify Hannibal in the evening with the specter of a greasy cardboard box and the scent of pepperoni clinging to his kitchen.

He could come up here before dusk, curl up in the empty space next to Hannibal, and wait, and watch, for him to come alive again. The idea catches at him, barbed and bright; moves him in a way he doesn't have a word for.

But there are the dogs, who have been left alone too long already. They'll save him from doing anything dumb, intruding where he's not welcome or inviting a conversation about intentions and desires that would likely not end well. It's just as well, really.

Still, before Will leaves, he moves the bedside lamp two inches to the left, just off-center from where Hannibal has it so perfectly lined up. Just enough to say *I was here*, should Hannibal choose to read that message.

"Sleep well," Will finds himself saying, and then he's off without looking back, away to where his daylight life is waiting for him.

Will may be developing a familiarity with travel, but the dogs aren't resigned to it. Despite an evening visit from the neighbor who looks in on them, they're near-frantic by the time he gets home. It's a comfort, really: anytime he gets a little dubious about his own existence, he can count on the pack to remind him that he's real.

He lets everyone out to blow off steam in the yard, then settles on the front porch to fire off a few text messages clumsily with his injured hand. One to Hannibal, to thank him for the breakfast and offer to return his key at their next appointment if he doesn't need it sooner. One in answer to a "Jack told us, you okay?" query from Bev, to confirm that he's fine and taking a couple of days off. He taps the side of the phone distractedly while he ponders a third message to Alana, but that feels - awkward. He still doesn't know quite what happened between them. Alana will want to *discuss* it, and Will's in no mood to be dissected by Alana's careful, gentle questions.

Instead he sets the phone aside and lets himself sink into the comforting routine of a day at home with no one to perform for or answer to. Dogs, laundry, a book, a nap - it's almost like being the person he was before Jack Crawford pulled him out of his classroom to borrow his imagination and his fear.

In the end, he doesn't end up returning Hannibal's key because they don't end up having a session, precisely. Hannibal calls, later than any human would, to let Will know that his office will be under renovation for a week or two, so he's cancelling appointments.

Will doesn't *mean* to keep him on the phone, not really, but he happens to know a few things about renovations. So there's some discussion about refinishing the floor where the carpet has to be replaced, and then about Will's first day back in the classroom and his students' uncomfortably avid interest in his vampire-fighting injuries, and he doesn't quite notice time passing until he glances over at the clock and fifteen minutes have ticked by.

"Shit. Do you have a million other patients to call?"

"You were the last. I've nowhere else to be at the moment."

Will lets himself consider whether that was intentional or happenstance. *You don't do anything by accident* he'd said, warmed through with firelight and bourbon and relief, and Hannibal hadn't contradicted him then.

"How many of us are there?"

"A few." Hannibal's voice is warm; it's an odd but not unpleasant change to hear it without seeing his face. "I'm told that most humans prefer to see their psychiatrists before sundown. And my kind rarely seek contact with each other for personal or professional purposes. We don't mingle well, generally."

That's one way to put it. An image of the carnage in Hannibal's office flashes unbidden through Will's mind.

"I saw a therapist a few years ago who kept daylight hours," he finds himself saying, and thinks of her, briefly. Blue couch; bland flower poster; a vague disinfectant smell and a tendency to blame everything on his absent mother. He hadn't lasted long with her. "She was very concerned about my dogs."

"How many did you have then?"

Will pauses for a moment to think back. “Four when I started seeing her, and then I found Buster. She’d kept her mouth shut about four, but adding the fifth one really drove her crazy. *A way of distancing myself from the world*, I think was how she put it.”

"She assumed that maintaining close contact with the world was a priority for you. I can see why she didn’t last.”

He closes his eyes, feeling uncomfortably seen even though Hannibal is miles away.

“I was already distanced. The dogs made the distance bearable.”

They fall into a companionable silence then, one breathing down the line, the other silent but for the faint rustling of a page. Hannibal must be taking notes or flipping through Will’s file. But he doesn’t end the call.

Finally Will asks: “Is this our session?”

“It’s a conversation. Does it need to be something else?”

“Questions answered with questions. Sometimes you sound alarmingly like a therapist, Doctor.”

“If you answered more of my questions instead of deflecting them like that, I might not need to ask so many.”

Will laughs in spite of himself, a sharp bark that rings loudly in his quiet house.

“*Fine*. No, it doesn’t need to be something else. I was just curious.”

“I don’t generally conduct appointments by telephone. So much information is conveyed through facial expression and body language that the finer nuances go missing by phone.” Will resolves not to wonder what his body language has been conveying. But before he can go on to say *okay, so this isn’t a session*, Hannibal adds: “But a conversation between friends is a different matter.”

“You called me your friend before. That night I was sleepwalking.”

“I believe the term to be appropriate. And I have faith in your ability to let me know if it’s incorrect. I don’t believe you to be someone who lets others breach that distance of yours unless you choose it.”

Will blinks at that, only briefly taken aback. He supposes it’s not wrong. He’d prefer if Hannibal were wrong just a little more often, really.

“I thought about staying, the other day. Hiding out in your house for the day where no one else could find me to ask more questions about Tobias Budge.”

“You would have been welcome.” Hannibal pauses, and seems to be picking over his words for a moment. “I would have been pleased to have provided a sanctuary for you.”

Irritation prickles unaccountably down Will's spine. "I've spent a long time building my own safe place out here. Other people generally prove to be unreliable sanctuaries, in my experience."

"You have your boat on the sea. You've done well to build a secure life for yourself, Will." Will tries not to warm under the praise in Hannibal's tone and hates that he does anyway. "But you can't live at sea forever. Everyone has to come to shore eventually."

It's probably because it's late by human standards that Will's losing the thread a little bit here. What's a metaphor and what's not. What, precisely, Hannibal is offering him. He scrubs the heel of his good hand across his eyes and tries to focus, tries not to voice the yawn that suddenly forces itself out of his mouth.

It must be audible anyway, at least to preternaturally sharp senses, because Hannibal lets out a soft rumble of a laugh and says, "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking about how late it's gotten for you. Please forgive my rudeness."

"It's not that late," Will grumbles when the last of the yawn fades. "I'm just sleeping badly. Still having weird dreams."

"Hm. I'd like to revisit the notion of exploring that, eventually. Now that you know me a little better."

Will had nearly walked out of that first appointment at the mere suggestion of letting Hannibal rummage through his mind, much less actually attempt a glamour. Just because Hannibal's tools for dealing with difficult minds were of a different sort than a human psychiatrist would use didn't mean Will liked the idea of them any better.

He'd have laughed at the idea of Hannibal providing him sanctuary at the time. Before he'd heard the terribly human timbre of his voice: *I was worried you were dead.*

"You're trying to take advantage of me being too tired to argue." He doesn't try to hide the next yawn, drawing it out obnoxiously loud and long, not even slightly sorry about it. "Does that work on other people?"

"No one else fights me hard enough to make me try it. Most people accept at least some of the advice they're paying me for."

"I'm not paying you."

"If you were," Hannibal says, low and amused in Will's ear, "I'd advise you to go to bed. I think we'll be able to have our appointment next week if the repairs stay on schedule, but I'll call in a few days to confirm. We can continue the argument then, all right?"

"Count on it." Will considers asking what Hannibal will do after he hangs up. How he spends his lonely evenings after his patients are gone, or in fact whether they're lonely at all. Instead, he just adds, "Goodnight, Hannibal."

The house is quiet after the phone call ends, the dogs long since curled up in their preferred sleeping spots, breathing in various comforting rhythms. Will picks his way across the floor around their sprawling bodies, pausing to nudge Buster with one foot to stop his wheezing snore. Buster grumbles and rolls over, but falls silent.

Will tumbles into bed grateful for the touch of his own sheets and the familiar sounds of his home, so different from the silent, still grandeur of Hannibal's. A different kind of sanctuary.

You can't live at sea forever , Hannibal had said, but it doesn't sound like such a terrible idea to Will.

He lets himself imagine the soft lapping of waves at a boat hull, somewhere far out to sea. If he finds himself not alone in his imagined seafaring, and if his sailing companion as he slips into dreaming happens to be someone he's never actually seen in the sunlight his mind conjures up - well. One can be forgiven for fudging the facts a little, in dreams.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> There's an impression of layers being pulled back and peeled away, veils falling, and it doesn't hurt at all but Will suddenly is absolutely certain that it *could*. That Hannibal is being careful with him. That he could stop being gentle, at any moment, now that he's gotten Will to invite him in.

Chapter Notes

> Oh my god, you guys, all of this? Is like THREE SENTENCES in the outllne. Which was always very rough, it was always going to be longer than that when written out, but... um. Not 1700 words long. I'm starting to think this isn't gonna be a 4-chapter piece. Why, self? Why are you like this?

The beach is freezing, a brutal wind whipping past Will's face and trying to bite at him through his coat. It's not unwelcome. He appreciates the reminder of where his body is anchored even as his mind spins untethered. If he can feel the tight clench of his fists stuffed deep in his pockets, he knows they're not really occupied in killing Joel Summers.

Knows, but doesn't quite believe, because he *feels* it, the way the knife slams in fast at first and then slows as it meets resistance, flesh and muscle. Not bone; whoever the killer is, he at least knows enough to avoid hitting bone. Of course he does. He's done this before. The body going limp underneath him is a familiar sensation like relaxing into a favorite chair. The borrowed excitement Will can feel, fizzy and sick in his veins, isn't about the killing, it's about the person being killed.

Summers wasn't random. He *meant* something. He mattered for a reason Will can't quite see the shape of yet.

Another gust of wind smacks Will across the face, bringing tears to his eyes. He takes off his glasses to wipe them away and he's

in the car driving down a street he doesn't recognize and he's

standing by the side of the road scrabbling in his pocket for aspirin, as if aspirin can fix a pain like the one that's ripping his head in half right now, and his pocket is empty and he's

at Hannibal's house at his doorstep but it's still daylight, so he rings and he rings but there's no answer and he's

looking up dully when Hannibal says his name, because in Hannibal's voice it makes sense. He's *Will*, Will Graham curled into a ball in the backseat of his car. Hannibal leans over him in the dark, backlit by the moon, and calls Will back to himself, and time starts to make sense again.

Once Will's warmed through and has a glass of water in his system, he feels fine. A bit ragged around the edges, dull and postdromal, but in Will's life that's close enough to *fine*. Other than the existential terror of not remembering where the hell he's been in the past several hours. But he's not actually screaming, so that's probably as close to fine as it's going to get, too.

It doesn't stop Hannibal from putting him through his paces. *Say your name*, *lift your arm* , *look up, look down, look to your left*. Hannibal places cool hands on Will's forehead; at the small of his back, guiding him to sit as if he might topple over if a draft hits. Will keeps expecting the next instruction to be *heel* or *stay* or *roll over*. He's not sure if that's actually funny or if he's just on the verge of hysterics, so he bites the inside of his cheek hard and doesn't laugh.

Eventually he must pass some sort of marginal threshold for not being an emergency, because Hannibal relaxes fractionally and gets out of Will's personal space enough to get him another glass of water and then sit down next to him on the sofa.

Will drains half the glass and then asks, "What's the verdict?" He stares hard at nothing in particular across the room. Hannibal's face will be concern or pity and he doesn't feel like seeing either directed at him.

"I don't think you're in any immediate danger, but lost time isn't something to be taken lightly, either."

"I could have hurt someone."

He glances over to see the response to that. It's the small twitch that Will's learned to read as Hannibal's frown.

"That's a concern, but you also could have hurt *yourself* , or been hurt. You might offer yourself at least the consideration you would offer one of your strays."

"I'm fine. You just *said* I was fine." Will can hear his own voice turning brusque and too-loud; a lecture on self-care is not what he needs at this exact moment. "Can you say the same for anyone else who came into contact with me today?"

It takes just a few seconds too long for Hannibal to respond, and in those seconds a chasm opens up in Will's stomach. What does Hannibal know? What did Will do?

"I *could*…"

Hannibal doesn't even have to finish the sentence before Will knows where it's going. He can't even be angry; he basically hung a sign around his neck asking for this one. *Please, Hannibal. Poke around in my mind where I've expressly told you not to go. You've finally found the situation I can't say no to.*

It would almost be better if Hannibal would just go ahead and let himself sound smug.

Will allows himself a *very* pointed sigh before he asks, "How do we do this?"

How, apparently, is that Will is supposed to make himself comfortable. Set his glass down, stretch out with a throw pillow under his head, and --

"I'll smother you with this pillow if you tell me to think of England," Will grumbles.

Hannibal looks entirely too pleased that Will is feeling recovered enough to threaten his life; he doesn't even bother to point out that he doesn't actually have any use for breath anyway. He carries on instructing as if Will hadn't even spoken.

"A clear mind would be best, but if that's too difficult, try to think about something that you find relaxing. There's no need to actively try to remember where you were. I'll be able to find it in your mind, or I won't, but you straining yourself trying to recall won't help matters."

He smiles bright and condescending at Will, and it's awful. The tips of his eyeteeth are wickedly sharp. Will wants to smack him, and he wants to know what those teeth feel like, and he wants very much to think about *anything but either of those things* , fast, before Hannibal gets inside his head.

He flails blindly for the first relaxing thing he can think of and ends up with the woods. This time of year in the woods, more or less, with fallen leaves crackling under his feet and the pack racing loose nearby. The way the air smells, just before snowfall. The whistles and chirps of the remaining cold-weather birds too stubborn or stupid to have left for sunnier climates.

It's almost a vivid enough reconstruction to distract him from the sensation of Hannibal sliding into his mind. Almost.

It's a delicate sensation, odd and shivery, more *cold* than *pain*. It's oddly like being touched, but being unable to determine just where the touch is felt. There's an impression of layers being pulled back and peeled away, veils falling, and it doesn't hurt at all but Will suddenly is absolutely certain that it *could*. That Hannibal is being careful with him. That he could stop being gentle, at any moment, now that he's gotten Will to invite him in.

He doesn't want to be in his own head when Hannibal removes the final veil and exposes whatever bare and vulnerable thing he'll find there. He may have been the one to volunteer for this, a willing lamb to the slaughter, but it's worse than he'd imagined, someone *in his head,* walls breached and alarms blaring, he doesn't want this, doesn't *want* --

With a wrench and a great gasp of panic, he pulls himself back into the woods, moving fast now, running blindly nowhere in particular. Just *away.*

The path isn't one he knows, but it barely matters. All that matters is to be *somewhere else*, so he barely falters when he realizes he's broken through the edge of the woods and skidded to a stop in some kind of…courtyard?

It's a small castle or a large mansion - just when he's decided it's the former, he blinks and it looks more like the latter. It wavers, protean, before his eyes - one moment crumbling and ancient, then sturdy and only slightly battered a heartbeat later.

"He remembers it a lot of different ways." The voice comes from behind him, and he's turning to see its source before he's even aware he's moved.

The girl might be eight or ten or twelve; she wavers, too. She's golden, though, that much appears to be fixed - she's lovely and golden and her eyes are older than the rest of her. They look like Hannibal's. *He loves her terribly*, Will knows, and in the strangeness of this day it doesn't strike to him as particularly odd to know how Hannibal loves this girl, without knowing her name or whether she's real or why she's in his head.

"Where is it?" he finds himself asking, still half out of breath from the run, but determined to focus on this to the exclusion of the dim sense he still has of Hannibal in some other corner of his mind. "Or - where was it? I'm sorry."

Her smile is a less feral version of Hannibal's. There's no bite to it.

"*Is*, I think. I don't really know. Do you want to come in?"

He does, fiercely, and entirely aware that it's a terrible idea.

"Do you have to invite me in?"

She shrugs, the faintest echo of Hannibal in the motion. "You're human. That rule only works one way. You can come in if you want. Or you can sit out here until you're ready to go back. I don't know if you'll have another chance, though." A frown flickers across her face. "I don't think you're supposed to be here."

Somewhere else, resting on a comfortable sofa under a light blanket, Will feels a shudder ripple through him. Hannibal's found something, a stray thread of Will's memory to tug at. Even this far away Will feels suddenly unsteady. As if he might unravel altogether, spill out into Hannibal's hands in a tangled mess that could never be put right.

Away, he thinks, some of that panicked urgency returning.

"I'm Mischa," the girl says, and leads him up the garden path - now overgrown with weeds, now bright with flowers, dappled with sunlight and moonlight in turns - and to the front door. "This was our house, once."

He expects the door to creak open slowly under his hand for the full haunted house experience, but it opens smoothly for him, as if he's welcome. Piling one more bad decision

on top of a day full of them, he steps inside the castle in Hannibal's mind.

The door shuts itself behind him, easy and quiet, and he's alone with the entirety of Hannibal's very long life.

Chapter 4

The entryway is is sparse and lovely and subtly wrong. Footfalls don't echo as they should, the sounds swallowed as if by immense unseen tapestries. The sunshine streaming in through a tall window is just slightly too bright. *Maybe he's forgotten how it's supposed to look*, Will thinks, with a pang of something like pity with sharper teeth.

His steps are indecisive. Rooms and hallways branch. He knows instinctively that they spread out further from there, layers and passages built up over centuries. The house is a labyrinth, and Will unsure whether he's minotaur or sacrifice.

Perhaps it doesn't matter. Everyone reaches the maze's heart eventually, man or monster.

He picks a doorway and begins to explore.

The expanse and contraction of time doesn't seem to follow any logic that Will can discern. It seems to take minutes to look through one room's vast and intricate displays of anatomical studies, while a smaller room with a few paintings of dilapidated churches feels as if it takes hours.

There's a room where a little blonde girl plays in a garden, sunlight streaming down from nowhere in particular. She doesn't pay any attention to him. The light is perfect here: a detailed memory, not a flawed recreation. There's a comfortable chair in this room, and a sense that it's frequently inhabited; that Hannibal comes here to be with her.

Somewhere, he can't help but know, Hannibal is unravelling his mind, searching for things Will may not want to know about if he finds them. He feels it distantly, like a half-forgotten dream.

The girl from outside the house is nowhere to be seen, but he feels watched nonetheless. It's that, more than any real sense of impropriety, that sends him stumbling to a halt when he finds himself in a room full of - well. He supposes that he *could* consider this another form of anatomical studies. There's definitely anatomy involved, anyway.

If a man blushes when he stumbles into a room full of semi-pornographic artwork in a house inside a vampire's head, does he make a sound?

(He does. It's a little bit embarrassing. He hopes Hannibal can't hear it.)

It's not that Will hasn't seen these particular acts or body parts before. Hell, he's done more than a few of them. But not in recent years, since he started to get a better handle on his own wants instead of those he unintentionally reflects from other people. It would take some doing to remember the last time, and it wasn't worth the effort it would take.

He can appreciate artistry, though. The drawings are lovely, precise and perfect, each capturing a moment Will should not be seeing. He tells himself it's that transgression, nothing else, that sends heat prickling under his skin, racing like wildfire.

They're all stills - sketches, paintings, images captured with eidetic clarity. He skips quickly past the ones that are outright explicit, but lingers over some of the others despite himself. One is just a hand and wrist, hastily sketched but brimming with motion, fingers captured mid-curl reaching for something unseen. In another, captured with more detail, a shoulder and jaw are captured in striking detail, dappled with sunlight. The features are barely sketched in, as if the person himself were an afterthought.

(There are both men and women, he can't help but note. So that answers *that* question that Will's been carefully not thinking about ever since Jimmy Price speculated about it in gleeful detail over lunch one day.)

Will doesn't know art, and he doesn't know or care all that much about sex either, but he knows emotion and motivation. There's something that perplexes about the images, taken as a whole. They're skilled work, made with a lively curiosity and an occasional tenderness. But he's not pulling emotion from them the way he should be, the overwhelming way that's driven him out of art museums before. There's no real heat to them, and no true depth of emotion. All these people, all these... *encounters*, he thinks, the prickle of heat warm again under his skin...and there's hardly a real feeling to be found.

He supposes that anyone else might feel sorry for Hannibal, but Will knows better than most people that sex and intimacy aren't always the conjoined twins that most of the world seems to want them to be. Hannibal has emotions. Will's seen them. But wherever they stem from, it's not this room.

He looks away and keeps walking, deeper into the house's heart.

The corridor where Hannibal keeps death is easier to stumble into than it should be, as if the house wants him there. There's no warning. One minute he's in a sunlit alcove, looking out the window at swans skimming across a pond, and then he turns away to find a door that wasn't there before.

It's all very Alice in Wonderland. He half expects to stumble across a DRINK ME bottle next, or some fantastical pastry marked EAT ME. He's smiling as he turns the knob, which sticks a bit and then gives with a harsh scrape of metal on metal.

And then he's - somewhere else, a vast, shadowed space. Most of the memories here are old, wild and monstrous. It's dark and chilled, smelling of dried blood and tasting of fresh. He can't feel the girl's eyes on him anymore; wherever he's stumbled, it's somewhere she can't or won't go.

He knows in his bones that the room is hungry. The house is, suddenly, hungry. It would keep him, if he would let it.

Go on, he thinks he says. *You brought me here. Show me what you wanted me to see*.

The house does.

Hannibal's lived a very long time, and if he's mostly hewing to human notions of morality these days, it's a relatively recent change. There've been so many dead. Oceans of blood.

The house doesn't show him every one of Hannibal's kills - he'd grow old and grey if it did. But he sees enough to know that nowhere near all of it was about hunger or survival. Some of it was boredom or irritation. Much of it was pleasure. Hannibal may have been a man before he was a monster, but he was a monster for a long time before he began to remember how to be a man.

Some of it was art.

Will is only human, with a human's heart, and he's sick with it. But he's not only that. It's not anywhere near the first time he's wished for the ability to turn off the way his mind works, and it won't be the last. He's been using himself this way for a long time, and letting others use him; it's sickeningly easy to feel what Hannibal must have felt, creating all this carnage.

The hunger would have been savage at first, blinding, hollowing him out. Sometimes - a girl in an alley in Lithuania, a man by the sea in Prague - the killing was only for that. An unrefined grasping for something to ease the gnawing pain. *The very first time*, the house croons to Will in its wordless voice, *Hannibal had cried after with the sweetness of it and the cessation of pain, and didn't know the tears were blood until they smudged the back of his hand crimson. It had startled him enough to stop the tears.*

He'd been so young then, a very new monster.

Hannibal doesn't cry anymore. He doesn't let himself get that hungry. The more recent kills are planned and precise. They're a want, not a need.

It's art, now, and Will can't pretend that he doesn't see it for what it is to Hannibal.

It's not terribly dissimilar to the other room in a way, and the images blur behind his eyes. Bodies in motion. The quick butterfly shiver of a hand, tendons flexing in the wrist, is it pulling Hannibal close or pushing him away? A head tipped back in ecstasy or lolling in a blood-loss daze?

It's a dark reflection of the other gallery, smeared with blood and roiling with the emotion the other images lacked. Here on the other side of the looking-glass, the monster's heart pulses with borrowed life.

The room has more stories to tell him, if he will listen, if he will *stay*.

The house has been lonelier than it knew, until he came.

End Notes

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